The Fourth Church Pulpit

A STRONG WORD FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD

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If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own. ... Faith, when it comes down to it, is often our breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, "What is God doing? Where on earth is God going now?"

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Scripture:
John 16: 12-15
Acts 15: 1-11

"On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." (NRSV)

One of my favorite poets is the late Phyllis McGinley. And one of my favorite Phyllis McGinley poems is entitled, *Lament for A Wavering Viewpoint:*

"I want to be a Tory
And with the Tories stand,
Elect and bound for glory
With a proud, congenial band.
Or in the Leftist hallways
I gladly would abide,
But from my youth I always
Could see the Other Side.

"How comfortable to rest with
The safe and armored folk
Congenially blessed with
Opinions stout as oak.
Assured that every question
One single answer hath,
They keep a good digestion
And whistle in their bath.

"But all my views are plastic,
With neither form nor pride.
They stretch like new elastic
Around the Other Side;
And I grow lean and haggard
With searching out the taint
Of hero in the Blackguard
Of villain in the saint.

"Ah, snug lie those that slumber
Beneath conviction's roof.
Their floors are sturdy lumber,
Their windows, weatherproof.
But I sleep cold forever
And cold sleep all my kind,
Born nakedly to shiver
In the draft from an open mind."

[*Times Three, Selected Verse From Three Decades*, p.207]

I don't know about you, but I find that life is a lot less complicated if I don't have an open mind. In fact, life is simplified considerably if I close my mind to the myriad of options open to me on a myriad of topics. It is comfortable to know exactly what you believe, where the boundaries of truth lie and above all else what is moral and immoral behavior. It is tempting, no matter the topic, to retreat to the nearest certainty and hold on for dear life in matters of sexual morality, politics, certainly religion.

The trouble is, there seems to be something about religious faith that challenges all certainties; something about believing in a living God that calls us to a posture of openness, to a willingness to be surprised, to be startled, with where, in God's name, we find ourselves going ... or who, in God's name, we find ourselves associating with ... or what, in God's name, we find ourselves believing.

That dynamic is there from the beginning of our story. Things were not working out in the earliest Christian Church the way they were supposed to. In the towns and cities where the disciples of Jesus visited the synagogues to tell the story, things were taking a surprising turn. More and more gentiles were responding positively to the Gospel, believing it, asking to be baptized and to become part of the church. That wasn't supposed to happen. Everyone knew who the chosen people were. Gentiles were the unchosen.

What perplexed the disciples was the simple fact that gentiles wanted in the church, which they had been assuming was an exclusively Jewish operation. As often happens when change is occurring, some were probably allowing them in: others were not. And in the middle of the controversy, the Acts of the Apostles relates a peculiar but very instructive story. It's about a gentile named Cornelius and a Jew named Peter. Peter has a vision which completely overturns his former notion of what it means to be faithful to God. The vision assures him that the old categories of clean and unclean, right and wrong, are not absolute. As a result, Peter agrees to baptize Cornelius, the gentile. Well, when the church leaders back in Jerusalem get wind of what happened, Peter is called on the carpet. He explains his dream. He tells the church leaders that God apparently is interested in gentiles in addition to Jews, and they agree to this new development, sort of.

Not long thereafter, two missionaries by the name of Paul and Barnabas are aggressively recruiting gentiles in Antioch. A delegation from Jerusalem makes a site visit to the new project and they ask a very delicate question ... "You are circumcising these new converts, aren't you?"

In one of the understatements of all time, Acts says, "there was no small dissention and debate." This time Paul and Barnabas are called on the carpet ... and the record of that church meeting sounds a lot like what happens whenever Christians get together for official councils, conclaves, and conferences or General Assemblies.

Peter speaks about his own change of heart. Paul and Barnabas explain that God's spirit doesn't seem to know or care about the differences between Jews and gentiles.

And then James proposes a compromise: a strong word from the middle of the road. Both points of view are intellectually defensible. The conservatives are defending a good and venerable tradition, a beautiful and just and enduring faith that has carried them through times of persecution and exile. The liberals need to know that tradition — that it is theirs as well. The liberals, on the other hand, are invoking a part of the tradition the conservatives sometimes forget, namely that the Spirit of God not only doesn't pay much attention to human rules and regulations, but sometimes seems to change or to challenge those rules and regulations when they interfere with God's real priority which is for people to live gratefully and faithfully and responsibly with God and with their neighbor.

So it's not simply the good liberals against the reactionary conservatives: or the stalwart conservatives against the weak-kneed liberals. It's a difference of basic conviction — of truth itself. Someone has to win and someone has to lose — until James stands up.

Politics is compromise; everybody knows that. From Henry Clay to the daily machinations of the Chicago City Council, politics is the sometimes noble and always absolutely necessary art of the possible. You give a little, you get a little. Sometimes you get it all, but mostly, if you will not give, what you get is conflict, polarization, alienation, violence maybe.

Until somebody like James stands up and speaks a strong word from the middle of the road.

If the liberals will agree to a few small points, maybe the conservatives will give one major point.

If the gentiles Christians will avoid idols and behave themselves sexually and buy their meat from the right butchers, the Jewish Christians will compromise on circumcision.

The deal is done. A letter is composed and sent up to Antioch with the terms explained and everybody is happy. And change happened peacefully and the freedom of God's spirit, along with the importance of the tradition, was honored.

And I think it was because a man of intellectual breadth and moderation, personal courage and a gracious spirit stood up and spoke a strong word from the center. That whole dynamic is a very important model, I believe, for Christian faithfulness in our time.

At its best, our own religious tradition has been strongly centrist, a middle-of-the-road approach to the major issues of faith and life. It's not always a comfortable place to be ... but it is where in God's economy, I am convinced, we are called to be.

One of our finest Reformed Theologians was H. Richard Neibuhr, brother of the more-famous Reinhold. H. Richard taught at Yale for years and wrote one of the most important books of the century, *The Meaning of Revelation* in which he wrote that:

> "The great source of evil in this life is the absolutizing the relative, which in Christianity takes the form of substituting religion, church, or morality for God."

Part of what it has always meant to be a Presbyterian Christian is a kind of radical refusal to identify any human structure, entity, or ideology with God: Presbyterians are suspicious of any religious attempt to make absolute anything but God alone. Because of that historic suspicion of any ideology, particularly any political structure, that claims absolute truth and demands absolute obeisance, Presbyterians have a consistent record of opposition to, and persecution by, the politics of the extreme right and left. Before anybody else said anything, Presbyterian Reformed Clergy gathered at Barmen in 1933 and critiqued Nazi ideology for its claims of absolute truth and in the name of Jesus Christ uncategorically condemned it as false. And it is no accident that the heirs of the reformer Jan Hus in Eastern Europe were severely persecuted by Marxist dictatorships and that when the Romanian regime was crumbling the spark that set off the conflagration was at a Presbyterian/Reformed Church in Timosoara.

We have been, down through the centuries, a strong voice from the middle of the road, theologically, intellectually, socially, and when necessary, overtly politically.

A recent essay in the *Christian Century* observed that:

> "There is consensus about very little in America today — except perhaps that there is no consensus, and that we live in an increasingly polarized and vitriolic culture. No matter what the issue, the first voices to be heard are the most extreme and divisive, speaking the politics of contempt that has become so pervasive." What is needed, the authors contend, is a renewed "emphatic Christian center." ["Forming an Emphatic Christian Center: A Call to Political Responsibility," Kyle A. Pasewark and Garrett E. Paul, *Christian Century,* August 24-31, 1994.]

They make a very helpful distinction between the center as merely the mid-point between two extremes, and the center as a "substantive core of conviction that actively centers us as individuals and as a society." [p.280]

There is a difference between a middle-of-the-road position which is only a compromise position and which tries to get the two extremes to talk to one another — and an "emphatic center that develops and articulates its own commitments."

And it is there — the core of conviction, the strong middle of the road that hope for the future is found — the future of the church in our culture, the future of the nation itself.

These are polarized and vitriolic times. Within all the churches there are voices from the extremes; attacking, abusing, maligning, sowing suspicion; in the Southern Baptist Convention, the Roman Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church. And in the nation each daily newspaper, it seems, further documents how profoundly we are polarized.

The whole dismaying business of Oklahoma City and the right-wing militias preparing to go to war against the rest of us sent me to my shelves looking for a book written in the 1960s, — *The Strange Tactics of Extremism.* Harry and Bonaro Overstreet had written about the threat of Communism: this book was written as the John Birch Society and other right-wing groups were attacking the government, universities, churches — with what seemed at the time like some success.

> "We in America," the Overstreets wrote, "having given extremism, as it were, a constitutional right to exist — have been able to afford the active presence of a far Right and far Left because we have been overwhelmingly a nation of moderates. Extremists of Left and Right, home-grown and imported, has been with us always. But the liberal-conservative or conservative-liberal center has been the natural habitat of the vast majority of our people." [p.13]

The danger, the Overstreets argue, is that if there aren't enough of us in the center — intentionally — with a strong sense of why we are there, the extremes have more influence and disruptive power than we can afford to let them have.

Peoples and nations have not always remembered that. The Russian people allowed their revolution to be co-opted by Leninist extremists, and one of the longest and most brutal dictatorships the world has ever known was the result. Fifteen years later, partially in fear of that very extreme, the German people went to the polls and elected the National Socialists, the Nazi party, and their leader, Adolph Hitler.

Where there is no strong center, a strong and courageous voice from the middle-of-the-road, extremes of left and right, will prevail.

So that, I propose, is our vocation — in our churches, and in our communities, in our local PTAs, school boards, civic associations, and in the body politic: to risk "shivering in the draft from an open mind," to resist the temptation to absolutize our own convictions, our ideology, our political party, even our church and its traditions; to stand, intentionally, strongly, feet planted firmly, in the middle of the road.

The reason is that the world — the church — needs us to be there. God, I'll risk suggesting, needs us to be there.

Do you remember the last thing Peter said to that august church tribunal in Jerusalem? There was much debate and dissention, pro and con, liberal and conservative, left and right. It must have been very heated and I know the ideological opponents were pretty much condemning one another to hell; and just before James stood up and delivered his strong word from the middle of the road, Peter said something that put that debate, and all of our debates ever since, into perspective.

> "We believe we will be saved," he said, by the grace of the Lord Jesus; not by our religious our cultural tradition, our creeds, our theologies, our moralities, not certainly by winning this conflict ... "we will be saved," he said, "by the grace of the Lord Jesus — just as they will."

That is the gospel ... God loves us. In Jesus Christ, God loves and redeems and saves all who will accept the gift. It is out of God's mysterious, amazing graciousness.

We are saved, not because we are Presbyterians or Baptists or Roman Catholics; not because we are conservatives or liberals, Republican or Democratic ...

We will be saved — "just as they will," whoever "they" are, by the grace of the Lord Jesus ...

All praise to Him.

God of Grace, give us the courage to be open to your spirit, blowing with newness and power in our world and in our lives. God of power and might, give us strength to be honest and faithful and to speak a word of hope when we find ourselves engaged in controversy. God of love, give us humility in our political and religious commitments and grace to reflect, in all our relationships, your love for all your children. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.